

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, God, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, God, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my God; and no one knows the Son except God, and no one knows God except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal God.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

7/3/11 Sermon by Susi Kawolics

This is the weekend when all across the country, we are engaging in Independence Day celebrations. Way back in July of 1776, John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail of Independence Day: *I'm apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more.* Well, we're doing our part together by our act of devotion to God, even though our gathering here this morning in actuality has nothing to do with the holiday. But as Americans, we do value our freedom, our independence, don't we? This holiday we celebrate how those early colonists, who wanted their freedom, their independence from the oppressive laws of the British, adopted the final draft of the Declaration of Independence. The yoke of the laws, the governance of England, had become a taxing burden upon them, and it was breaking them.

In our gospel today, Jesus is speaking to followers who could have related to the sentiments of those early colonists. Those whom Jesus was addressing were not only being oppressed by the Roman government, but many of them were Jewish people who were also being burdened by the laws of their very own religion, the laws as interpreted by the Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees at that time were the keepers and enforcers of the religious laws, and they prided themselves on their ability to recite them word for word. However, they had lost the basic principles upon which those laws were founded: Principles of justice, mercy and faith. In later verses in Matthew, we hear Jesus chastising these religious leaders saying: "they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (23:4). The heavy burdens they laid on the people were not the laws *per se*; they were rather their particular interpretations, practices and expectations.

Jesus came to those who were breaking, who were weary from those burdens, and offered to give them rest. But what is important to understand is that Jesus is not telling them that they will not longer have any burdens, or any responsibilities. What he is saying is twofold: First of all, he has come to relieve a certain burden. His message to his followers is the same as it is to us: even though we are called to follow his way, and to seek to do his will, the burden we bear is never that we have to prove that we are good enough at this to earn his love by what we do or don't do. Jesus' love and grace are freely given, and we live as his disciples not in order to earn that love, but rather in response to that love. We are free from our burden of having to achieve, and our burden of guilt when we fail.

Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor admits to wrestling with this message. She says: "I may believe that I live by God's grace, but I act like a scout collecting merit badges. I have a list of things to do that is a mile long, and....the majority of them are things I think I ought to do...that I had better do or God will not love me anymore....I thought that the way to find rest for my soul was to finish my list of things to do and present it to God like a full book of savings stamps, but as it turned out that was not the ticket at all." ("The Open Yoke" is the sermon in the book, *The Seeds of Heaven*).

So that kind of pressure and demand is the burden that Jesus is relieving us from. That is the first part of his message "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." But this is said in tandem with his summons "Take my yoke upon you." That is the second part of his message. While he takes away our burdens, he also asks us to take on his yoke.

Now today, for most of us, yokes are not really part of our everyday lives. But they are a beautiful symbol for discipleship. A yoke is a wooden beam normally used between a pair of animals. By putting this beam on their backs, it enables them to work together in pulling a load, in doing work. The word Yoke actually comes from a verb which means to unite or to join.

On a farm, a yoke is laid upon animals and it makes it possible for them to carry heavier loads easier, loads that would be impossible for one to carry by itself. The yoke joins the animals together to work as a team. When Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves, he is inviting us to work with him. He offers to take the lead, to help us, to guide us. He says we are to learn from him. So the yoke of Jesus is not seen as a burden of servitude, or bondage, but rather as a way of being connected to Christ, of being in relationship with him. This is meant to make our work easier, not more difficult. As Eugene Peterson translates this part of the passage in "The Message" – Jesus says, "Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

Jesus invites us to be yoked together with him in living out our lives as his disciples. So this passage, which we happen to be reading on Independence Day weekend, ends up being not one declaring our independence as much as it is one of a declaration of interdependence. And, perhaps at times, may even be a declaration of dependence.

There are times when the yoke can symbolize this dependence. I have read that the yoke was sometimes used for animals being trained to do work. In those cases, a smaller, younger animal was yoked with an experienced, more mature animal. The smaller one thought it was doing some of the work, but in actuality, all

the work was being done by the other one. There may be times in our lives when this image is true for us as well. The touching poem "Footprints", which many of us are familiar with, tells how there times in our lives when we don't feel like Jesus walking by our side, that we have been left to ourselves to carry our burdens. But the poem says that those are the times when he is carrying us through difficulties and losses, through the hardest walks of our lives. Those are the times when he is doing the work, even though we may not know it.

So the yoke is a powerful symbol of how we live out our calls as Jesus' disciples. And ministers have the opportunity to wear a unique symbol of this yoke. Many of you know that I have a love and a weakness for stoles. This probably started when I worked for In Stitches Center for liturgical art here in Bainbridge. Although I worked in the office part of the studio, I spent a lot of time with the owner Brenda Grauer, who uses her artistic talent and theological grounding to create beautiful fabric art, especially stoles. And so, yes, I wear stoles because they are beautiful and I love them. But the symbolism of the stole for the minister is that of the yoke of Jesus. The stole is a reminder to me, and to all of us, that we are yoked with him as we minister to others.

This yoke is also a symbol of wisdom. Jesus says in our passage today that "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." This wisdom is talked about in the Book of Sirach, in apocrypha of the Old Testament. The author describes the Wisdom of God as a glorious virtue to be sought. He writes, "*Come to her with all your soul, and keep her ways with all your might. Search out and seek, and she will become known to you; and when you get hold of her, do not let her go. For at last you will find the rest she gives, and she will be changed into joy for you. Then her fetters will become for you a strong defense, and her collar a glorious robe. Her yoke is a golden ornament, and her bonds a purple cord. You will wear her like a glorious robe, and put her on like a splendid crown. (Sirach 6.26-31)*" This image is of the wisdom of Jesus as a beautiful yoke, a joyous burden. And in taking on this yoke, Jesus also promises us rest.

Those words of his: "I will give you rest" can also be translated, "I will give you refreshment." We are promised refreshment and renewal as we walk in tandem with and yoked to Jesus. Today is our Sabbath, our day of rest. This time of worship is a time that fulfills Jesus' promise. So as we worship together, and as we gather around the table, we remember not only that Jesus asks us to take his yoke, but we also remember his promise. May we come to this table to be replenished, may we come to partake of this food and drink, remembering that we are never alone in our journeys, never alone in our call to service. We are always yoked with the one who loves us, and walks beside us every day, every moment of our lives, and offers us rest and refreshment. Amen.